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ABSTRACT

Pinpointing specific recommendations for higher educational reform, the paper advocates changes in the recruitment, admittance, retention, and commitment to Mexican Americans. Investigating these areas, the report finds: (1) College admissions offices often recruit from other institutions, bypassing local "barrios", (2) Unrealistic grade expectations and an unwillingness to work with students who do not fit the Anglo mold bar Mexican Americans from higher education. To retain these students, an environment is needed that provides reinforcement for individual motivation and cultural relation. Also, courses depicting Mexican heritage and culture would develop a stronger self-identification for the Mexican American student and a better understanding for the Anglo. Funding of Mexican American student services and academic programs should be an integral part of the university budget rather than a "special" and temporary fund. (KM)

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MEXICAN AMERICANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Paper Prepared

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MEXICAN AMERICANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As diverse as the Mexican American attitudes and values are, one issue in which there is common agreement is the need for education. Whether the tag of identification is Chicano, Mejicano, Mexican American, Spanish American or La Raza, all recognize that the door to opportunity lies in their ability to effectively participate in the educational processes in this country.

Political action on the part of the Mexican American is reflected by the Chicano movement. This movement is aimed at influencing the decision-making processes of those institutions which affect the Mexican American. The institution of higher learning, thus is a focal point for Mexican American political action.

The plan which Mexican Americans strive to implement calls for a reform of higher education. It calls for a reconstruction of traditional attitudes and structures resulting in effective Mexican American participation in higher education and in strengthening the application of university and college resources to the Mexican American community.

This paper pinpoints specific recommendations for accomplishing the plan for the reform of higher education.

MEXICAN AMERICANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

No group is perhaps as diverse in values and attitudes and in such a degree of conflict with itself as the Mexican American. Created out of conflict in 1848, as a result of the Mexican-American War, Mexican Americans have passed from generation to generation the bitter disappointment resulting from the realization that Anglo America has not and will not accept its brown people as equal partners in what realistically is an American pluralistic society. Torn between accepting the Anglo "way" at the expense of their own heritage and culture or continuing to encounter discrimination and racism for exhibiting *orgullo* at being a member of *La Raza*, Mexican Americans have themselves followed conflicting philosophies to deal with the Anglo and his institutions. Yet, for all of their diversity and conflict, Mexican Americans do agree on one issue. . . the need for education. Whether the preference for identification is *Mejicano*, *Chicano*, Mexican American, Spanish American, or *La Raza*, all agree that the focal point for social justice is education. The door to opportunity lies in being able to successfully negotiate the educational processes in this country.

One of the more significant developments among the ranks of the Mexican American is the growing support for an ideology manifesting itself through pride in Mexican American

heritage and culture and individual self-respect. This ideology is *Chicanismo* and its supporters are *Chicanos*. Political action on the part of *Chicanos* is being exerted toward institutional decision-making processes which affect the Mexican American. One such institution, characterized by time worn structures, an aura of isolationism, and a capacity to exclude the very society it was set up to benefit, is the highly conservative American system of higher education.

American colleges and universities have been shaken by *Chicano* pressures to change their attitudes, practices, and institutional structures. The *Chicano* and other elements of the Mexican American minority are looking back to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, to the 1954 Supreme Court decision striking down the "separate but equal" policy upheld by this country in dealing with an ethnic "deviant", such as the Mexican American, and is holding higher education to this moral and legal commitment of equality, cultural respect, and equal access to higher education for all students regardless of race, nationality, cultural background or color.

The once proud "ivory towers of knowledge" are beginning to sway and buckle. The Mexican American has contributed to the creation of an intolerable environment where an institution created to exclude must now become inclusive in dealing with all students. The problem which exists is that to become inclusive, higher education must be reformed or

reconstructed in attitudes, practices, academic offerings and in basic structure. Mexican Americans, with the more visible *Chicano* element at the forefront, are calling for reconstruction or reform of higher education. They are calling for a reconstructed experience once Mexican Americans are admitted into courses of study in higher education. As initial steps toward implementing this much needed reconstruction, the following changes and actions in recruitment, admittance, retention, and commitment are recommended.

Recruitment

Colleges and universities have not effectively established recruiting practices specific for the Mexican American. The Mexican American student must be recruited locally. University deans supported by admissions offices and a conglomerate of other bureaucratic "dressing" have continued to spend time and money recruiting students from other college and university campuses, often bypassing local concentrations of *barrio* residents. Financial barriers and family configurations restrict Mexican Americans from traveling large distances to go to a college or university.

A college or university should establish *barrio* or neighborhood recruiting centers staffed with black, brown, and Anglo *Chicanos*. Such a center need not be elaborate and staffing could consist of graduate students. The vital ingredient of the center would be a sincere desire to relate

to and understand Mexican Americans and provide guidance and programs enabling students to understand what the college and university has to offer. A close working relationship would have to develop between the recruiting centers and high schools serving the *barrio* or neighborhood.

As indicated earlier, the scope of Mexican American recruitment should be local. However, some colleges and universities, such as land-grant institutions, have a golden opportunity to recruit state-wide. University administrations should re-define the role of the Extension Services and their budgeting sources and include guidance counseling and recruitment of Mexican Americans as part of their responsibility. The Extension Services have staffs located in every county in each of the states. To increase the effectiveness of this outreach, colleges and universities could work together through the Extension Services and inform potential students of services and programs available at all state colleges and universities. Institutional pride resulting in duplication of services between universities is a waste of scarce resources. A responsible institution should recognize the need for intra- and inter-university planning. The mutual utilization of a university Extension Service by a total state system of higher education is in the public interest.

The establishment of *barrio* or neighborhood centers and the re-defining of roles for the Extension Services would

narrow the gap which now exists between institutions of higher learning and the Mexican American community. A communication link would be established strengthening a two-way flow of resources between the college and university and the *barrio*.

Admittance

Admission procedures at college and university levels must be liberalized. Too many Mexican Americans who have successfully confronted the mono-cultural and mono-lingual social environment which exists in the elementary and secondary school system, are turned away from higher education. The basis for rejection is an unrealistic grade expectation and unwillingness to work equally well with students who do not fit the Anglo mold.

Colleges and universities should establish procedures for the evaluation of present admission policies. These procedures should involve administrators, teaching faculty, students and representatives of the Mexican American *barrio* or neighborhood. Suggested changes in admission practices should include supplementing formal application forms with personal interviews conducted by Mexican American graduate students. The interview process would provide for added insight into the prospective student rather than a mere reliance on a grade judgment.

Echoing what so many other Mexican Americans have already verbalized, standardized tests used for gauging the ability of Mexican Americans to participate successfully in an institution of higher learning transform a beautiful language and culture into a burden already heavy from prior educational desecration. If testing is to be used, instruments should be developed which have been localized enabling Mexican Americans to express concepts which can be related to their life experiences. Colleges and universities should cooperate on a regional basis to establish testing instruments which would reflect regional culture, technology and societal issues.

Another aspect of admissions practices is the application form which even the computer has difficulty digesting. Experience has shown that colleges and universities in the Southwest utilize the most complex system of procedures which no doubt has caused even veterans of higher education to cringe. Why must admissions offices hang on to inefficient and difficult systems?

Retention

Thousands of Mexican Americans in higher education are recruited, admitted and then forgotten. They are left to flounder in an academic atmosphere which is alien and too often ignorant of the needs of the Mexican American. The United States Commission on Civil Rights reported in October, 1971, that of every 100 Mexican Americans entering first grade

in the Southwest, only 23 enter college and five receive a college degree. This compares with 100 Anglos entering first grade, 49 entering college and 24 receiving a college degree (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1971, p. 12.). The Mexican American attrition rate in higher education must be at least equal to the Anglo performance. What is needed is an environment which they can fall back on when individual motivation needs reinforcement or when students need to relate to their own culture.

A college or university serving a multicultural population needs to reflect this multicultural element in its academic program, supporting student services, and its campus life. Each campus should have a separate and distinct cultural center for its ethnic students. Mexican Americans need a cultural center providing counseling and guidance services, tutoring and facilities for cultural programs; but, whenever a Mexican American makes such a suggestion, administrative and faculty eyebrows are raised and cries of already overrun budgets echo throughout dean's offices or faculty senates. What happens, however, when athletic stadiums and athletic budgets are reviewed for expansion? These same administrators and faculty members buy up the choice stadium seats and employ coaches whose pay is second only to the university president.

Why can't a college or university provide or construct a facility to be used by Mexican Americans? Allow Mexican American student organizations and advisory boards comprised of Mexican American faculty, students and parents to determine policy governing such a center and assist in financing its operation.

Another aspect of Mexican American retention in higher education is the need to provide courses depicting his heritage and culture and meeting his specific needs. These courses should involve all elements of the population. For the Mexican American, course content would assist in a better understanding of his own culture and heritage and point out the valuable contributions which Mexican Americans have made to the development of this country. By his own participation in class studies, the Mexican American would come to understand his rightful place in the history of the Americas and in contemporary societal developments. For the Anglo and other ethnic groups, courses on Mexican American culture and history would serve to develop an understanding and appreciation for the Mexican American and in so doing, develop a better understanding of their own behavior and motivations. Selected courses covering Mexican American culture and heritage should be required of all students in Southwestern colleges and universities.

Formal coursework at the undergraduate level should involve Mexican Americans in learning the necessary skills to successfully negotiate college and university learning experiences. Seminars on learning and study skills should be required of all freshmen. The experience of being involved in seminar-type situations is important to the inexperienced freshman as it is to the graduate. These courses should carry academic credit applicable toward any degree. Graduate students could and should be given the responsibility for working with small groups of Mexican Americans in seminar courses. Preferably, these graduate students should themselves be of Mexican American cultural background.

A college or university should establish a graduate level program of research and study. Present knowledge on Mexican American family life, behavior and economic-political needs is inadequate and consistently detracts rather than adds to the understanding of the Mexican American. One has to but look at college texts being used in Mexican American studies programs to recognize the need for sophisticated research. Undergraduate and graduate students must become involved in *barrio* field experiences and should be given the opportunity to confront varying Mexican American philosophies regardless of their controversial nature.

Colleges and universities need to specifically recruit for Mexican American faculty and staff. Emphasis needs to be

given to the placement of Mexican Americans in positions of influence within the hierarchy of higher educational institutions. Foremost of the influential positions in any college or university is that held by the teaching faculty. No other individuals establish themselves as the providers of knowledge to the student population. Mexican Americans must be given the opportunity to convey knowledge to their own people, other ethnic minorities, and the Anglo alike. Mexican American students must see that their *carnales* can also compete equally well in the academic arena. Mexican American faculty need to be placed on graduate committees which advise and guide students through their programs of study. This includes freshmen faculty with new ideas for student participation in higher education. Many *Chicanos* support the idea that only Mexican Americans can teach Mexican American students or ethnic studies courses. The fallacy in this position lies in its implication that no one except a minority can understand a minority. There are many Anglos having a wealth of human understanding who have taken a long step toward effectively working with Mexican Americans. Everything being equal, however, Mexican Americans should be given preference in teaching Mexican American students and ethnic studies courses for the added insight which they can lend to assisting Mexican American students and in presenting Mexican American cultural subject matter.

The feeling that qualified Mexican Americans cannot be found to fill teaching positions in higher education is ridiculous. Granted, being Mexican American does not automatically qualify an individual for a position, but neither does a Ph.D. degree guarantee that an individual can do an effective job of teaching. Colleges and universities should place a high value on a person's experience in working with Mexican American groups. This experience can be invaluable in being able to relate an accurate picture of the Mexican American situation to a class of university students. Accrediting associations have not helped to dispel the myth that a Ph.D. degree is absolutely essential to fill a faculty position in higher education. It would behoove a college or university to "step ahead of the crowd" and employ Mexican Americans with or without the standard academic credentials. Until Mexican Americans, in greater numbers, have successfully completed the credentials preferred in higher education, employ those with experience and knowledge gained through active participation in the Mexican American *barrio*.

Mexican Americans need to be placed in administrative positions within the college or university system. They must become involved in the decision-making process where they can contribute to the over-all growth and effectiveness of the institution. This includes administrative positions at all levels.

Commitment

It is unfortunate that the recent interest in recruiting, admitting and retaining the Mexican American in higher education is due largely to the availability of federal or special funds or to pressures applied to college and university administrators by local Mexican American organizations or federal agencies threatening the withholding of funding for university programs. A situation has developed which has encouraged colleges and universities to place Mexican Americans in "showcase" positions. This placement is not, in most cases, a sincere desire to recognize the uniqueness of the Mexican American nor to truly appreciate his culture and heritage. It is more a desire to appease the Mexican American, to satisfy federal guidelines to take advantage of federal money, and to "ride out the storm" until this so-called "fad" runs its course.

The funding of Mexican American student services and academic programs should be an integral part of the university budget. There is a danger in establishing special line items or special funds to support efforts to aid the Mexican American. What happens when these "special" funds are exhausted? A true commitment toward assisting the Mexican American in higher education will be reflected when colleges and universities no longer deal with the Mexican American in terms of "special" funds. Monies appropriated should be a part of the regular budgeting process.

Colleges and universities need to face the reality of a pluralistic society demanding diverse approaches to educate all Americans. This country has no one color, nor is it mono-cultural or mono-lingual. All Americans are not the same. Institutions of higher learning must commit themselves to strengthening cultural diversity rather than cultural de-struction.

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